

Metta Sutta (Karaṇīya-Metta Sutta)

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In the lives of the Asian Buddhists, particularly of the Sri Lankan ones, the Metta Sutta has an unbeatable record of wide popularity. While being organically contained in the Uraga Vagga of the Sutta Nipāta [verses 143 - 152], it has also come to be included in the collection of Minor Anthologies, referred to in Pali as the Khuddakapāṭha [pages 8-9]. It is an unusually abridged sutta of only ten verses of four lines each. In spite of its remarkable brevity, the sutta reveals its purpose with an impressive clarity and directness.

The sutta begins with its very first verse telling us that ' he who wishes to attain to that blissful state of tranquility of Nibbāna [*Karaṇīyaṃ atthakusalena yaṃ taṃ santaṃ padaṃ abhisamecca*] should do the following.' The last verse, i.e. No.10 ends with the line which says that ' he who develops loving kindness in the manner indicated comes to the termination of his *samsāric* continuance, or in other words, that he shall not be born again in a mother's womb [*Na hi jātu gabbhaseyyaṃ punareṭi ' ti*]. A closer scrutiny of the sutta's entire contents as a whole gives one the feeling that the sutta is not unaware of the fact that an honest pursuit of the goal of Nibbāna carries with it a rich flavour of true renunciation.

This sutta is highly prescriptive in character in that it lays down in no uncertain terms what an aspirant to *bodhi* or enlightenment, which bestows ultimate peace as against *samsāric* turmoil [*santaṃ padaṃ abisamecca*], should undertake to perform [*karaṇīyaṃ atthakusalena*]. These virtuous qualities of life which need to be acquired at the very outset are basically laid down at the level of household life, in the living reality of humans, whether men, women or children. They are not bestowed on humans from outside, through the grace of an external power whom one has to supplicate or pray to. The very first virtue of

competence, ability or skill as implied in the word *sakko* reveals this very essential anthropocentric nature of Buddhist spiritual culture.

This is followed by *ujū* and *sūjū* which denote honesty, and uprightness in application. Besides honesty in transactions which humans need in their day to day life, there has also to be sincerity of purpose, devotion and dedication in the hearts of humans. It is in such culture alone that any spiritual growth can be founded. The sutta adds three more lovely virtues which would invariably be the envy of gods and men. They are *suvaco*, *mudu* and *anatimānī*.

Suvaco means one who has pleasant speech [pleasant spoken]. It is quite often rendered as obedient. We believe this is not what the original Pali implies. Obedience is connoted by the Pali word *assavo* which means 'willing to listen to.' Next comes the concept of *mudū* which means gentle, flexible and malleable [its opposite being rough and rugged]. Finally in this group of down to earth virtues we get 'not being arrogant' [*anatimānī*]. All these are contained in the first verse of the sutta and are prescriptive enough to make first class citizens of men, women and children anywhere in the world.

What follows hereafter swing in the direction of renunciation or homelessness. They portray a diligently circumscribed life which is calculated to lead to the desired goal of moving away from the world. They speak of a person who is content and easily supportable, with minimum involvement in worldly affairs.

Thereafter, such a detached person is called upon to further his spiritual culture by developing his attitude of loving kindness or *mettā* towards all living beings - *mettañ ca sabbalokasmim mānasaṃ bhāvaye aparimānaṃ*. As the very name Metta Sutta implies, this is the main theme of this sutta. This perfected development of *mettā* is believed to be capable of leading to *samsāra* termination - *na hi jātu gabbhaseyyaṃ punar eti*.

This in brief is the scope of the Metta Sutta. A diligent human being, man or

woman makes his or her way towards the aspired spiritual goal along this path of cultured living. However, in the course of Buddhist history, time and tradition has stepped in here [and it is difficult to say precisely as to when and where], and given this sutta a strange slant, making it more of a talisman, a source of power to ward off distress, disturbances and discomfort coming from external sources like angered divinities and disgruntled evil spirits. This, we believe, is invariably the result of an emerging Commentarial interpretation, coming down through an Aṭṭhakathā tradition which possibly is traceable even to pre-Buddhaghosa times.

The Suttanipāta Aṭṭhakathā of Buddhaghosa Thera, called the Paramatthajotikā, writing on the Metta Sutta, gives a story of monks who had taken up residence for their Rains R'treat in a forest area which was the abode of tree deities. The deities who had taken their residence on tree tops were seriously inconvenienced by the monks who were dwelling below under the trees. They endeavoured to expel them from the region of their residence by creating fearful visions and dreadful sounds. The health of the monks is said to have suffered seriously on account of this. They returned to the Buddha and reported the matter. This story occurs also in the Khuddakapāṭha Commentary in identical form.

Cutting a long story short, the Buddha advised those monks to return to their old residence, saying that no other place could be found for them anywhere in the whole of India [*Bhagavā āvajjento sakala-Jambudīpe antamaso catupāda-pīṭhakaṭṭhānamattam pi tesam sappāya-senāsanam nāddasa.*]. As a protective measure to guard themselves against the threats posed by the deities, the Buddha is said to have preached this sutta to the monks for personal chanting [*Sace pana devatāhi abhayaṃ icchatha imaṃ parittaṃ uggaṇhātha.*].

It is interesting to note that the Commentary makes the Buddha add further that this *paritta* will also serve as a *kammaṭṭhāna* or theme of meditation.

The *grand finale* of this Commentarial exposition with regard to the origin of

this sutta is when it says that ' the Buddha delivered this sutta to those bhikkhus for the purpose of providing a basis for the development of loving kindness [*mettatthañ ca*], a source of protection [*parittatthañ ca*] and for the purpose of providing a *jhānic* basis for the generation of transcendental wisdom ' [*vipassanā-pādaka-jjhānatthañ ca*].